



JAZZ CONCERT—"Jazz is modern music—and nothing else is! Deep down in his heart the serious composer, fated to go on writing sonatas, symphonies and operas, knows this is true."

Modern Music: 'A Dead Art'

Serious music, which for 300 years has produced works of beauty, has run onto sterile ground, says a critic. Today, only jazz qualifies as vital and creative.

By HENRY PLEASANTS

SERIOUS music is a dead art. The vein which for three hundred years offered a seemingly inexhaustible yield of beautiful music has run out. What we know as modern music is the noise made by deluded speculators picking through the slag-pile.

This is not to say that there will not continue to be orchestra concerts, recitals and opera. Nor is it to say that music is dead as a creative phenomenon. New music plays a greater part in daily life than ever before. But it has nothing to do with what is known as modern music—so-called in order to emphasize a modernity otherwise neither existent nor apparent.

The last really modern serious composer, modern in the sense that he spoke with the full authority of the cultural forces of his time, was Wagner. With him ended the long evolution of the art of music in the harmonic or European sense. All that has followed has been reaction, refinement—and desperate experimentation.

Those of his successors who have achieved genuine celebrity—Bruckner, Mahler, Strauss, Debussy, Ravel, Sibelius, Schoenberg, Bartók, Berg, Rachmaninoff, Prokofiev and Shostakovich

—may be described as Strauss once described himself, as triflers "who had something to say in the last chapter." They have had at least a public. For the younger men there has been none. Nothing they have written has been keyed to any considerable segment of contemporary taste or met any contemporary musical requirement other than their own ambition to be composers.

It is his failure to meet contemporary requirements that distinguishes the contemporary composer from composers of any earlier epoch. Previously, it could always be said that composers represented the taste and the emotional and intellectual characteristics of their own time. Haydn, Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Verdi, Wagner, Brahms, Strauss and even the early Stravinsky were all popular composers. There was a demand for their music, and they could make a living from accommodating the demand. This is not the case today.

THE amount of modern music performed and recorded represents no valid challenge to the truth of this observation. Modern music is performed, recorded and listened to not because there is any popular demand for it but because performers, record-

ing companies and, to a considerable extent, serious music audiences believe that they owe the composer a hearing.

Nor should the numerous festivals of contemporary music, the grants, fellowships and commissions to contemporary composers be interpreted as evidence of vitality. If modern music had any real vitality it would make its own way.

IN former times contemporary music survived, despite opposition from critics and professional musicians, because the public liked it. Today, it languishes despite critical and professional support because the public will have none of it. That it survives at all, at least continues to be played, is due simply to the fact that the public no longer has anything to say about it.

All the conventions of our musical thinking are calculated to convince the layman that tolerance is the finest of all virtues. For him who finds tolerance difficult, there is the specter of a future generation's rapture, the implied suggestion that to voice his derogatory opinions is to risk going down in history as an ass.

The contemporary composer, preoccupied, not with himself nor with society, but with the problem of how to continue in a tradition esthetically

Ever since Stravinsky and his "Rite of Spring," modern music has had its passionate attackers and passionate defenders. A fresh attack comes now in a new book, "The Agony of Modern Music," by Henry Pleas-

and technically exhausted, and contemptuous of the music that exhausted it, produces a music of technical ex-cogitation in which the listener finds neither pleasure nor the reflection of anything of the least concern to him.

It is not that the contemporary composer does not know his audience. As Copland has said, "There is no disagreement as to what audiences want; they want what they already know, or something that sounds like it." But now, unlike the situation in Haydn's time, there is a difference of taste between composer and public. What pleases the public does not please the composer. Finding little sympathy from his audience, the composer turns to his colleagues for comfort, forming a society of (Continued on Page 57)

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MODERN MUSIC: 'A DEAD ART' - MODERN MUSIC: 'FRESH AND DIFFERENT'

by Henry Pleasants

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